

Drumbeat grows for US troops in Middle East war

Peter Symonds
13 October 2014

Despite denials from the White House, pressure is mounting for the United States to commit ground troops to Iraq and Syria, ostensibly to stem the advances of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militias. Over the weekend, ISIS fighters reportedly made further inroads in the Kurdish Syrian city of Kobani and tightened their control over the Iraqi province of Anbar, putting them on the outskirts of Baghdad.

Speaking on the ABC's "This Week" program yesterday, US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General Martin Dempsey suggested US troops would be needed on the frontline in Iraq. He pointed in particular to the likelihood of a "decisive battle" to recapture the northern city of Mosul, which fell to ISIS militias in June. "My instinct at this point is that will require a different kind of advising and assisting because of the complexity of that fight," he said.

Dempsey made similar comments last month declaring that if he believed US military advisers needed to accompany Iraqi troops into combat, he would advise President Obama accordingly. The statements put the top US general at odds with the White House. National Security Adviser Susan Rice told NBC's "Meet the Press" yesterday: "We are not going to be in a ground war again in Iraq."

Nevertheless the logic of the war dictates the dispatch of ground forces by the US and its allies. The air war, which has rapidly expanded in the space of two months from a few isolated strikes in northern Iraq, now encompasses all of Iraq and Syria. However, the Obama administration is increasingly under fire over the ineffectiveness of the air strikes and faces demands for a further escalation of US military involvement.

Dempsey provided further ammunition for critics. Asked if it was true that only 10 percent of US and

allied warplanes dropped bombs on their missions, he declared: "That wouldn't surprise me if that's the right number. An enemy adapts and they'll be harder to target."

Over the weekend, provincial leaders in the western province of Anbar made a formal request to the Iraqi government for US ground troops to help fight ISIS militias. Provincial council president Sabah al-Karhout said that ISIS controls about 80 percent of the province. Vice-president Faleh al-Issawi told the *Times* that all of Anbar could "fall in 10 days."

Haditha is reportedly the only major town in Anbar still firmly in government hands. Since the beginning of the month, ISIS forces have captured a series of towns including the provincial capital of Ramadi. On Saturday night, the provincial government suffered a further setback when General Ahmed Saddak, Anbar's police chief, was killed when a roadside bomb hit a convoy in which he was travelling.

Speaking to AFP, US defence officials confirmed that the situation in Anbar, the scene of the heaviest combat during more than eight years of US occupation, was "tenuous." Iraqi government troops, they acknowledged, were ineffective against the ISIS forces. "They are being resupplied and they're holding their own, but it is tough and challenged," one official said. In June, Iraqi troops defending Mosul folded in the face of an ISIS offensive. A similar collapse in Anbar would open the way for ISIS fighters to attack Baghdad.

General Dempsey acknowledged that the US had used Apache attack helicopters recently to repel an ISIS attack on a government position some 20 kilometres from Baghdad airport. "Had they overrun the Iraqi unit, it was a straight shot to the airport, so we're not going to allow that to happen."

Underscoring the sectarian character of the war, the

only inroads into ISIS have been made, not by the Iraqi army, but by Shia militias in Diyala province to the north and north-east of Baghdad, and Kurdish peshmerga fighters in northern Iraq. Their persecution of the Sunni Arab population has only strengthened the hand of ISIS and allied Sunni militias in the largely Sunni Anbar province.

While the US is determined to prop up the Iraqi puppet regime in Baghdad, Washington's main objective is over the border in Syria. The ISIS advances in Iraq provided the Obama administration with a pretext for reviving its plans, shelved last year, for an air war to oust President Bashar al-Assad. For the past three years, the US and its regional allies have been funding and arming anti-Assad forces, including Islamic fundamentalists such as ISIS and the Al Qaeda-linked Nusra front.

ISIS advances on the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobani near the Turkish border have fuelled demands not only for ground troops, but for the Obama administration to target the Assad regime. Republican Senator John McCain told CNN yesterday that "pinprick bombing" was not working and called on the Obama administration to make a "fundamental re-evaluation" and ramp up the war. He called for the creation of no-fly and buffer zones in Syria and for US forces to go after "ISIS and Bashar al-Assad."

The Obama administration is already pressing the Turkish government to break the ISIS siege of Kobani either with Turkish troops or by allowing Turkish Kurdish fighters to join their Syrian counterparts, the People's Protection Units (YPG), in defending the city. To date, the Turkish government has held off and called on the Obama administration to explicitly turn the war against Assad and to establish US-backed no-fly and buffer zones.

After top-level talks with US officials last week, Ankara has made only limited concessions to Washington's demands. Turkish officials announced on Saturday that the country would allow the training of at least 2,000 Syrian anti-Assad fighters by American and Turkish special forces on Turkish soil. Saudi Arabia has already agreed to a similar plan. Yesterday, Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel spoke by phone to his Turkish counterpart Ismet Yilmaz to secure the use of Turkish air bases, including at Incirlik, for the US bombing campaign against Syria.

The Obama administration's differences with the Turkish government are not over the targeting of the Assad regime, but over its timing and manner. The US has secured the support of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and various Gulf states on the understanding that the main objective of the war was not the destruction of ISIS, but the removal of the Iranian-backed Assad regime. All of these US allies have been supporting the so-called Syrian rebels, including ISIS, over the past three years for precisely that purpose.

The civil war in Syria, as in Iraq, has an openly sectarian character. The largely Sunni-based opposition militias are targeting Syria's Alawite Shiite sect to which Assad belongs, along with other ethnic minorities. Saudi Arabia, in particular, regards the removal of Assad as essential to weaken its arch-rival for regional influence, Iran's Shiite fundamentalist regime. In turn, Iranian leaders are warning against any military intervention against Assad. As reported by the *Independent*, they have specifically said that "Turkey will pay a price" if it invades Syrian territory.

The US greatly intensified sectarian and ethnic rivalries in the Middle East when it illegally invaded Iraq in 2003 and ousted the Sunni-based regime of Saddam Hussein. Now the Obama administration has recklessly plunged into a new war in Iraq and Syria to secure US domination in the energy-rich region that threatens to trigger a far broader conflagration throughout the Middle East and beyond.



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